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Words Matter: Reporting on Mental Health Conditions

One in five Americans experiences a mental health disorder in any given year. Many will receive treatment and recover or learn ways to live with their condition. Yet headlines about mental health too often focus on rare, sensational cases that lead to violence or death.

The media plays a critical role in advancing our understanding of mental illness and substance disorders. How you report stories about individuals with mental health challenges can increase awareness and reduce stigma around these conditions.

Following are useful tips for covering mental illness accurately. Remember that the American Psychiatric Association (APA) is available to answer your questions and connect you with experts in this field.

Questions to Ask When Reporting on Mental Health

- Is mental illness relevant to this story? If not, there is no need to mention it.
 - What is your source? Don't rely on hearsay to report that a person has a mental illness. If you are reporting on a specific condition, make sure you are talking to a mental health professional to provide the facts. The APA can connect you with experts to discuss a wide range of mental health and substance use disorders, as well as the medications and techniques used to treat them.
 - What is the most accurate language to use? See below for advice about language that is specific and avoids derogatory terms.
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Choose Your Words Carefully

The words you use to write about mental health are very important, and can help reduce stigma around mental illness if carefully chosen. Focus on the person, not the condition.

The basic concept is that the mental health condition (or physical or other condition) is only one aspect of a person's life, not the defining characteristic.

- Preferred: She is a person with schizophrenia.
- Not preferred: She is schizophrenic.

Be specific. Mental illness is a general condition. Specific disorders are types of mental illness and should be used whenever possible (see below for a brief list and definitions of common disorders).

- Preferred: He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder
- Not preferred: He was mentally ill

Avoid derogatory language. Terms such as psycho, crazy and junkie should not be used. In addition, avoid words like "suffering" or "victim" when discussing those who have mental health challenges.

- Preferred: She has a mental health illness. She has a substance use disorder.
- Not preferred: She suffers from mental illness. She's a drug abuser.

Facts about Mental Illness

Misconceptions and myths about mental health are unfortunately common. Following are a few facts about mental illness in the United States, as well as key resources for the latest statistics on mental health.

- In any given year, one in five adults in the United States has a diagnosable mental disorder.
- One in 24 adults has a serious mental illness.
- One in 12 has a substance use disorder.
- Half of all chronic mental illness begins by age 14.

- Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death for all ages. It is more common than homicide.
- People with mental illnesses are no more likely to be violent than those without a mental health disorder. In fact, those with mental illness are 10 times more likely to be the victims of violent crime.

For more information

- [National Institute of Mental Health](#)
 - [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
 - [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)
 - [MentalHealth.gov](#)
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Common Mental Health Terms

Following are definitions of some of the most common mental health disorders. For more complete descriptions, please consult *Understanding Mental Disorders: Your Guide to DSM-5®* or the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (both available from APA Publishing).

- addiction is a chronic brain disease that causes compulsive substance use despite harmful consequences
- alcohol and substance use disorders refer to the overuse of alcohol or drugs leading to effects that are detrimental to the individual's physical and mental health, or the welfare of others
- Asperger's syndrome is one of a range of neurological disorders within the autism spectrum
- autism spectrum disorders are a range of complex developmental disorders that can cause problems with thinking, feeling, language and the ability to relate to others
- bipolar disorder, also commonly known as manic depression, is a brain disorder that causes shifts in a person's mood, energy and ability to function
- depression is a common and serious medical illness that causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities once enjoyed; it can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems

- eating disorders are illnesses in which people experience severe disturbances in their eating behaviors and related thoughts and emotions; anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder are the three main types
- obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is an anxiety disorder in which people have recurring, unwanted thoughts, ideas or sensations (obsessions) that make them feel driven to do something repetitively (compulsions)
- posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault
- schizophrenia is a chronic brain disorder with symptoms that can include delusions, hallucinations, trouble with thinking and concentration, and lack of motivation.

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